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William Faulkner and Reality

HENRY NASH SMITH

Though William Faulkner's books have already become collector's items, his work is by no means a closed issue; however much the writer of a preface might like to gesture easily towards accepted opinions and then retire, he cannot attain this self-effacement in introducing Faulkner because there is no accepted opinion to invoke. Unfortunately, one has to make up his own mind.

The best way is perhaps to compare Faulkner with some traditional novelist: for instance, with Henry James.

The characters of Henry James, like those of Meredith and other novelists of the last generation, are almost all intelligence: they live in a region of the mind where mere biology does not count. If the lower levels of their existences occasionally irrupt into the subtle processes of their conscious lives, such intrusions are unexpected, even monstrous.

The characters of Faulkner, on the other hand, live for the most part below the levels of conscious thought. They are largely subconscious. They are never startled or angered by the intrusion of irrational subconscious drives into their scheme of things, because they are seldom ruled by any other forces. At most they regard the impulses which dominate them with a sort of dull hostility, like that of a man who at dawn awakes to pain from a familiar and incurable disease. Nothing could be more unlike the delicately poised minds of Henry James's characters than the terribly simple mechanisms which move most of the people in William Faulkner's books.

Faulkner, in short, has come a long way from the conception of fiction entertained by Henry James or Meredith. In *Mosquitoes,* for instance, Faulkner had a situation which seemed ideal for the Meredithian treatment: a group of characters temporarily isolated by an accident to the yacht on which they were spending the week-end.

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Mrs. Maurier's yacht might easily have become a counterpart of Sir Willoughby Patterne's drawing room. Faulkner does indeed set down many pages of dialogue; but instead of advancing from one idea to another, as Meredith's stories do, Faulkner's plot works itself out as a pattern of desires and frustrations which never become articulate. The conversation merely underlines the despair of characters whose intelligence can only make them half-aware of their fundamental irrationality. And in his subsequent books, Faulkner has practically abandoned conversation in favor of attempts to suggest with words mental processes which really have to be imagined as wordless.

It is evident that this simplifying of character to the basic tropisms leads Faulkner away from the world we call actual. Yet to say that his characters frequently resemble people who have been psychoanalyzed but not cured, is only to say that his characters do not resemble our conceptions of real people: it is not to deny their validity in their own universe, which has an organic unity like that of Donne's or Shelley's. The best way to understand Faulkner, in fact, is to regard him as a lyric poet whose characters have the value of symbolic projections of fragments of his mood. This lyricism is enhanced by the opulence of his descriptions. His settings are done with careful attention to visual values and to all the minutiae of sound and odor. The result is an almost stereopticon vividness: Faulkner's universe is integral and self-consistent, though it does not resemble very closely the universe which we, in our partiality, assume is real.

Yet what one remembers from his books is not so much pictures, as a mood. He seems often to be battling publicly with something deep and hostile within himself which he can not see or define. It is this struggle which causes readers to turn again to books which repel and attract them almost indistinguishably. Perhaps it is this struggle, too, which underlies Faulkner's selection of characters. He habitually

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chooses people who are undisciplined by any civilized pattern, and makes their savage, bewildered struggles the expression of his own inner conflict. The people of Faulkner's later novels, reduced to bundles of reflexes, seem to live in a world for which Saint Augustine and Thomas Aquinas and Shakespeare can have no significance. Their world has developed no traditions and has acquired no subtleties. Earlier, to be sure, Faulkner created characters like Jason Compson, Senior, who remembered or preserved in themselves the feudal South . . . people who had a code and could quote Horace. But Faulkner felt the remnants of Europe in America as unreal; and he portrayed in such characters a cynical awareness that their world was moribund. It dies, and is succeeded by the jungle. The death of this world, and the savage simplicity of the new, are Faulkner's chief preoccupations. He is obsessed by decay and insanity, and by the futility of man's struggle to become godlike in his wilderness of flesh. For his characters . . . one almost says, for him . . . the only tradition surviving in America is nature, cruel, beautiful, and unambiguous.

Memory-Narrative in *Absalom, Absalom!*

DOUGLAS M. THOMAS

Only when we have finished William Faulkner's novel *Absalom, Absalom!* can we easily retravel its ground, marking out in narrative sequence the "Was-not; is; was." which are that Southern swampland, then that magnificent house, and finally those gaunt chimneys and broken tombstones. By then we know that the novel is actually the story of a Thomas Sutpen and his "design," how it rose and fell and what felled it, and of the impact that this account, as a symbol of the whole Southern decay and final collapse through a slave-manor system its gentry tried to build, has on the mind of a young man two generations removed from it in time—an impact which registers in the whispered shriek *"I don't hate it!"* with which Quentin Compson ends the novel. We see that Faulkner spans ninety-seven years in time, from Sutpen's birth to the final night at Harvard, and nearly four-hundred pages in print, and that the novel is written in a vague, shifting, almost formless style. Yet it generates great power. The chief machinery at work in the novel, which at once dictates its form and produces its

unique power, seems to be a Faulknerian device which I shall call "memory-narrative."

A "memory-narrative" is an outflow of incidents from the memory which group themselves as the context around a particular person or event but which, since the mind at first recovers only an *essence* of that person or event, do not come forth in regular narrative sequence. A moment of importance from the past that is called to mind appears with certain visual-emotional qualities in an almost spatial context, and not immediately as the series of successive events leading up to and including that moment. What the mind receives is a sudden, five-dimensional picture which has three visual dimensions plus sound and emotion. I see the woman in the room, remember her eyes in the candlelight, and the quality of her voice, all simultaneous with a flash of the emotion which dominated the instant. But I must make an effort to recall the meeting and what was first said, and I do not remember at once the stroll which preceded it, nor the conversation afterward. If I were to relate the incident as it came to mind, the conventional time-action sequence which produced it would come forth, if at all, as material subsequent and incidental to the visual-emotional quality of its most memorable instant. To fix the instant as the logical evolution of a time-action sequence would be to suppress the five-dimensional "flash" with which the memory originally appears in favor of a conventional accounting of events which led to that memorable impression. This is what regular narrative does; it fixes the important instant, the "point" of an event, in its place in time. By doing so, however, it loses the "flash" effect of a memory which when it appears has every dimension *except* time. Regular narrative, depending upon time for its development, *arrives* at its point; "memory-narrative," with a spontaneity that overlooks any flow of time, *commences* with its point, filling in afterwards what few details seem to be cogent but assigning to none any precise location in time.

In *Absalom, Absalom!* there is no strict assignment in time of any incident except the presence of Quentin Compson at Rosa's and at Harvard. Sutpen's own account of his life (as related by Grandfather Compson) is composed of emotional, not chronological events; it is devoid of a sense of flowing time. Faulkner writes about a part of it:

> No more detail and information about that than that about how he got from the field . . . into his besieged house when the niggers rushed . . . than how he got from the rotting cabin in Virginia to the fields he oversaw: and this, Grandfather said, was

> more incredible to him than the getting there from Virginia, because that did infer time . . . while the other, the getting from the fields into the barricaded house, seemed to have occurred with a sort of violent abrogation which must have been almost as short as his telling about it—a very condensation of time which was the gauge of its own violence, and he telling it in that pleasant faintly forensic anecdotal manner apparently just as he remembered it . . .

Sutpen's account, in "memory-narrative," condenses time because he tells it "just as he remembered it," and this condensation of time, which is "the gauge of [an event's] own violence," is the key to Faulkner's device and in fact to the form of the whole novel. Since the novel's chief development is through "memory-narrative" which denies the sense of flowing time, and since Faulkner deliberately withholds all the information until the last, it should be understood that the novel's power comes from a sense not of culmination but of a sudden gathering of all the visual-emotional events into one great flash upon the reader's consciousness, like a complicated but complete memory which comes to mind within an unimportant time-frame.

The clearest example of the device is Rosa's account spanning sixty-five years. Her sequenceless description of events, with Sutpen's "demonic evil" as its theme, groups contextually around the afternoon in which he inflicted the (to her) monstrous, timeless indignity. Befuddled by unannounced shifts in the time-flow of her narrative, the reader loses track of time and receives instead the deepening visual-

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emotional image of Rosa's whole life, that "air of impotent and static rage" which is her characteristic. It is precisely this image, of course, which Faulkner intends that his device achieve.

Another statement of the principle occurs as Quentin is hearing Rosa's account:

> It (the talking, the telling) seemed (to him, to Quentin) to partake of that logic- and reason-flouting quality of a dream which the sleeper knows must have occurred, stillborn and complete, in a second, yet the very quality upon which it must depend to move the dreamer (verisimilitude) to credulity—horror or pleasure or amazement—depends as completely upon a formal recognition of and acceptance of elapsed time and yet-elapsing time as music or a printed tale.

At the beginning of the novel Rosa, a breathing consciousness of the dead past, confronts Quentin at the narrative level. Juxtaposed are the past and present. This establishes the formal time-frame, providing the "recognition of and acceptance of elapsed time and yet-elapsing time" which Faulkner demands must exist for purposes of verisimilitude. It is within this framework of established time that the novel unfolds through Faulkner's device, each narrator adding his separate knowledge of the same events as he remembers them. The story indeed takes on the "logic- and reason-flouting quality of a dream which the sleeper knows must have occurred, stillborn and complete, in a second, . . ."

It is for Quentin, finally, to receive the impact of the total view. He hears them all simultaneously at the last, and included is the powerful memory of having gone with Rosa to "Sutpen's Hundred" and meeting Henry—gaunt, mad, dying slowly. And during that winter night at Cambridge Quentin and Shreve fill in what details are still missing by a burst of creative imagination. The tumblers fall, and so tightly has Faulkner achieved a reader-Quentin identification that the reader himself seems to remember, as if he had lived with it, the intricate context of Quentin's remembering whose total effect upon the consciousness is that of all its component forces exploding simultaneously about a common moment—an impact which drives *"I don't hate it!"* through his clenched teeth at the last.

Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust* and *Sanctuary*

CARVEL COLLINS

Nathanael West's novels are attracting more attention than formerly, and deservedly so. Now that *The Day of the Locust* is widely available in a paper-backed edition, students of Faulkner might be interested to note the use which West made of *Sanctuary* when he wrote this, his second-best-known, novel. Borrowings from Faulkner among the current French writers who concoct synthetic novels "from the American" are too familiar and inartistic to document, but West's borrowings have not been noticed and are more effective and interesting.

Faulkner and West knew each other in New York in the very early 'thirties when West was manager of the Hotel Sutton, but they seem to have become much better acquainted later in Hollywood, where they were often companions on extended and, by now, fabulous hunting expeditions. West, according to his relatives and friends, greatly admired Faulkner's work. I believe he showed this admiration concretely by the skillful (and entirely proper) use he made of *Sanctuary* while writing *The Day of the Locust.*

The two books are quite different in many ways, but though one is set in Memphis and one in Hollywood and though the plots have large and fundamental elements which are not in common, both books show their authors' disgust with a machine-made society in which there is little of whatsoever things are of good report. But such a theme is universal; it is in some of the smaller elements that we can see that *The Day of the Locust* parallels *Sanctuary.* Earle, West's cowboy, has many of the characteristics of Popeye: Earle's face is described as being mechanically constructed by compass and ruler in a way not unreminiscent of Popeye's eyes like rubber knobs and general look of being stamped out of tin. Like Popeye, Earle cuts up birds with shears, is mechanical in movement, speaks little, and seethes with emotion under a calm exterior. And Earle finds that his girl makes love with his companion, the Mexican, in a situation at least slightly similar to that of Popeye and Red.

Other elements in West's book seem related to Faulkner's, though much less specifically and they by no means seem so certainly to owe part of their origin to *Sanctuary* as does Earle's astonishing—but astonishingly effective—cutting up birds *a la* Popeye. Among these vaguer but still visible relationships are: the roles played by Faulkner's

Horace Benbow and West's Tod Hackett, though West's ex-bookkeeper in his relation to Faye may also remind us slightly of Benbow in his relation to Ruby; the presence in each book of a brothel madam who has pretensions to gentility, of a precocious small boy, of a violent mob, of a hide-out away from the city where the men pass around jugs or jars of whiskey or tequila, and of an especially sexually attractive young girl around whom the male characters gather fascinated and over whom they fight. One might even go so far, and with such insignificant details, as to suggest that the paunch which West's thin Claude Estee imagines himself to have as he pretends to be an aristocrat of the Old South may owe part of its origin to the neat paunch which Faulkner, in the trial scene of *Sanctuary,* describes as part of the Southern aristocratic equipment of Temple Drake's father.

In all these similarities, if they are in fact similarities, West handled himself with his usual talent and followed the artistic rule recently enunciated by E. E. Cummings when he said that a good artist does not borrow from another, he steals. West effectively made these reminiscent snippets a part of his novel, and the book has no second-hand air about it whatever with the possible exception of parts of the characterization of the cowboy Earle—and even he is vividly memorable in his own right.

These possible similarities are interesting, it seems to me, but for students of Faulkner the dissimilarities also hold some interest. *Sanctuary* is usually regarded as a shocker and a book of almost total despair. But West's novel probably is more depressing, and in all but sexual matters more shocking; for though he followed Faulkner in a surprising number of motifs West did not follow him in including any character so admirable as the dignified, stoical, realistic Ruby Lamar, who gives to *Sanctuary* a tragic air above shock and corncob scandal.

REVIEW

Miner, Ward L. *The World of William Faulkner.* Durham, Duke University Press, 1952. 170 pp.

The subject matter of Ward Miner's book would have delighted Henry James. Where, as he might have said, does clumsy life cease and the patterned world of the imagination begin? If there is a hiatus between the world of the fiction and the actuality from which it arose what are the connecting links?

The visitor in Oxford begins to sort out places that have served as scenes in the fiction, but he also observes many places and characteristics that have been excluded. He observes, if one may so put it, that Faulkner has been preoccupied with the pastness of the present rather than with the presentness of the present, and that his settings and characters have been selected and created to that end.

In thinking back through some of the stories the visitor may also ponder the differences between the Jefferson of, say, *Light in August* and *Intruder in the Dust*. In the former there is a town of glowering skies and flint-hearted characters, but in the latter the landscape has a more commonplace look and the citizenry, although rather bumbling, is essentially of good will. Do the historical changes between the 1920's and the 1940's account for the differences between these two "worlds"? Or should one infer that Faulkner's themes and artistic needs have had their way with the actuality, that in each instance the town became what his fictional vision demanded of it?

Even though there is a hiatus between the fiction and the actuality, there are necessarily links between them, connections between the Oxford of Lafayette county. and the Jefferson of Yoknapatawpha county. Mr. Miner set himself the task of exploring the nature of these connections.

In the chapter entitled "Actuality" Mr. Miner outlines the history of Mississippi and especially of the town of Oxford: the buying of land from the Chickasaws, the founding of the University of Mississippi, the census at various dates, the judicial system, slavery, the Civil War in relation to the town, the deterioration of the soil, the "rise of the rednecks" under Senator Vardaman, the physical appearance of Oxford, and so on. Mr. Miner is not an expert historian and occasionally his observations seem less carefully considered than they might be, but on the whole the chapter is useful.

Generally speaking, Mr. Miner is looking for "sources" and he has a number of candidates for the historical figures behind the fictional figures, with, for example, Dr. L. Q. C. Peabody being based on Dr. Isom, one of the town's founders, and Thomas Sutpen being based on Alexander H. Pegues, a poor farmer who became the wealthy owner of slaves and whose building of a mansion (with a New York architect named Vaux—thus Sutpen's French architect) was interrupted by the War. But usually no great illumination of a story comes from such a disclosure. On several occasions Mr. Miner refers to A. B. Longstreet, the author of *Georgia Scenes,* being the president of the

University between 1849 and 1856, but he makes no point of the book's influence on *The Hamlet*. The tall tale is certainly an important influence in Faulkner, and an investigation of Longstreet's influence might turn up something about Faulkner's general knowledge of the tall tale.

There are also several errors of fact in Mr. Miner's book which could have been avoided by closer study of Faulkner's own texts. For example, in talking about the inhabitants of Frenchman's Bend, the McCallums, the Frasers, the Ingrums, *et al.*, Mr. Miner says that "these people made up the early population of Yoknapatawpha county, bringing with them the institution of slavery. . . ." But the opening pages of *The Hamlet* are explicit about this class not owning slaves: "They brought no slaves and no Phyfe and Chippendale highboys. They were Protestants and Democratic and prolific; there was not one negro landowner in the entire section."

Mr. Miner does not get far enough into the political life of Mississippi to enable him to speculate in any very helpful way about Faulkner's complicated and perhaps even inconsistent attitudes about the slave-owners, the professional and merchant classes, and the "rednecks." Mr. Robert Cantwell's recently published research into the life of Col. W. C. Falkner, Faulkner's greatgrandfather, is much more illuminating. Mr. Miner, however, does a pretty good job with the moral issues in Faulkner in relation to Mississippi history.

Perhaps the chapter at which one should look most intently is the one on "the legend," for it is there that history and imagination meet. Unfortunately Mr. Miner is not very original here, being satisfied to echo some points from Cowley's *Portable* and to rehearse some of the "history" told in the novels. It is in the legend, as James might say, that the artist lives and has his being, and it is to this therefore that Mr. Miner as critic-as-historian should have addressed himself most carefully. One must conclude that *The World of William Faulkner* though useful as a source book is not very illuminating as criticism.

WILLIAM VAN O'CONNOR
University of Minnesota

News and Comments

The editors of *Faulkner Studies* are pleased to announce the forthcoming publication of a volume of New Orleans sketches by

William Faulkner titled "Mirrors of Chartres Street," collected and edited by the editors with an introduction by William Van O'Connor. These sketches first appeared in the magazine section of the Sunday *Times-Picayune* in 1925. The editors feel that these sketches, aside from their interest to students of Faulkner's development as a writer, have an intrinsic value of their own, and should be made more widely available. For this reason, we are offering a special, pre-publication price to our subscribers and readers. The price, $2.75, will be advanced after publication date to $3.25, and we urge all our readers to take advantage of this offer. [See page 21 for additional information.]

Henry Nash Smith recently left the faculty of the English Department at the University of Minnesota to take a position as Professor of English and Custodian of the Mark Twain Papers at the University of California. The article published under his name was originally the introduction to *Miss Zilphia Gant,* published in a limited edition of 300 copies by the Book Club of Texas in 1932. It is reprinted here by the kind permission of Professor Smith and Mr. Stanley Marcus. The title is the editors' and neither Professor Smith nor Mr. Marcus should be held responsible.

Carvel Collins has conducted two Faulkner seminars at Harvard University, and has for some time been working on a full-length study of Faulkner. He asks for comments from our readers on his article. He also notes that one of our readers is interested in knowing about the real criminal case on which *Sanctuary* is in part based, and he writes: "I have by luck been able to get rather full information about it, though the actual stenographic account of the trial is not available. I intend to include the information in a chapter I am working up on *Sanctuary,* chiefly in an effort to refute the idea that the novel was invented from whole cloth just as a shocker."

William Van O'Connor has recently published several critical articles on Faulkner. An Associate Professor of English at the University of Minnesota, he will be teaching at Lieges next year.

Douglas Thomas writes to us from Claremont, California, where he is a graduate student.

The following article is to be included in the new edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica.* The author, Joseph Prescott, is Assistant Professor of English at Wayne University.

FAULKNER, WILLIAM*

FAULKNER, WILLIAM (1897-), U. S. author, was born on September 25, 1897, at New Albany, Mississippi, into a family with deep Southern roots. He was, among other things, an aviator in World War I, a student at the University of Mississippi, a postmaster, a Hollywood writer, a farmer, winner of the 1949 Nobel Prize in literature. He discovered his métier with his third novel, *Sartoris* (1929), the first in a series of works, laid in "Yoknapatawpha" County, Mississippi, on the past, present, and future of the South. The "saga" includes, most notably, *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *As I Lay Dying* (1930), *Light in August* (1932), *Absalom, Absolom!* (1936), "The Bear" (in *Go Down Moses, and Other Stories* [1942]), and *Intruder in the Dust* (1948). Dealing with all levels of Southern society, Faulkner saw the South as doomed by its sinful exploitation of land and man. U. S. readers first found Faulkner's experimental style prolix, turgid, and unnecessarily obscure, and his characters excessively brutal. But the nightmare world which these readers came to accept as a set of symbols for personal and social disintegration, more readily impressed European readers, to whose violently changing lives and societies Faulkner addressed himself with particular force both naturalistically and symbolically. Emphasizing the presence of the past, the power of doom, and the value of endurance, Faulkner transcended his region and his country to speak to the world.

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J.P.T.

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We are not publishing our usual annotated bibliography in this issue because of the number of valuable articles which we felt should receive publication. We intend to continue our annotations in the next issue.

We have received the following communication:

THIRTY-THREE

(For Joe and Benjy)

When Faulkner writes a novel,
He crowds the symbols in;
There is a hidden meaning
In every glass of gin,

In every maiden ravished,
In every colt that's foaled,
And specially in characters
That are thirty-three years old.

The moving year comes round again,
And I am thirty-three,
And I will hie to Oxford
For all the world to see,

And make some moonshine whisky,
Or lose my feeble wits,
Or cut an old maid's jugular,
Or fright a child to fits.

The fame a life of virtue
Could never bring me in,
Will flow to me unbidden
From Faulkner's turgid pen;

When Faulkner writes a novel,
My deeds will be enrolled,
Because I cut an old maid's throat
And was thirty-three years old.

By John C. Sherwood

Faulkner Critics: A Bibliography Breakdown

BRADLEY T. PERRY

(Continued from the Spring Issue)

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